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ABSTRACT

This report briefly describes a preschool and elementary school program for children who suffer from economic deprivation, cultural disadvantage, and emotional disturbance. During the five years of operation, the program combined funds from the Federal government, teachers from the District of Columbia public schools, and The Episcopal Center for Children, in Washington, D.C. Although the project was originally established as a demonstration and research center, it is now functioning as an on-going service, still in cooperation with public schools. This report deals primarily with the program itself and not with the research elements. The essay is divided into several parts: (1) identification of problem children; (2) staffing; (3) classroom structure; (4) teaching program; (5) activities outside of the classroom; (6) special activities; and, (7) work with the parents. The report concludes that many disturbed children have improved in their self-concept and relationship with others. (JW)

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# The Disadvantaged Child

The material presented at this time reflects the experience of five years of work with young school children who suffer from the triple handicap of economic deprivation, cultural disadvantage, and emotional disturbance. These children present a very severe problem in the classroom, and potentially in society as a whole. In many urban centers with large populations of disadvantaged families, the problem is indeed a serious one. It was the magnitude of the problem, and possibly the challenge it presented, that led to establishing a unique day school and activity setting in connection with a private residential treatment facility, The Episcopal Center for Children, in Washington, D.C. This was accomplished with the help of funds from Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, granted through the District of Columbia Board of Education, and has been carried out with the cooperation of the school system. All teachers in this "Special Project" have been teachers from the District of Columbia public school system and the entire plan could aptly be called an adventure in cooperation between a private social agency and a large public school system.

Though this project was originally set up as a demonstration and research center, it is by now functioning as an on-going service, still in cooperation with the public schools. This presentation deals primarily with the program itself and not with the research elements. The focus is the relationship between the child's handicaps and his school performance, and what can be done about it. Roughly, the content divides itself into several parts: (1) who are the children, and what are the problems? (2) staffing; (3) classroom structure, (4) teaching program, (5) activities outside of the classroom, (6) Special activities, and (7) Work with the parents.

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## The Children

At the beginning of the program the children selected ranged from a little under six to about eight and a half years. During the last two years, as older children have been phased out, only younger children have been accepted, with the current admission age between four and a half and seven. Boys only are involved in the project, and children who are demonstrably mentally retarded are excluded. The Intelligence range has been from 68 to 102 on the Stanford-Binet at the time of admission. Thirty five children are in this day program at any given time.

The children have all been referred from schools in the poverty areas of Washington, and are severely deprived. They were considered by their principals, teachers and counselors to be their most disturbed children, and their most difficult to handle or maintain in any kind of classroom. Since we are dealing with schools in areas heavily populated by Negro families, only Negro children have been referred to us. All come from similar environments and economic backgrounds, and about two-thirds of all the children have come from homes without fathers.

The problems presented by the children, as reported by the school, are numerous and severe. The larger number are disruptive, destructive, angry children with little or no self control. However, there have been quite a number of problems, and the following comments from school reports are representative, with many children having a long list of symptoms.

"Disobedient, responds to no discipline, stubborn, profane, refuses to do any school work, violent anger, destructive".

"Truant and accomplished liar; explosive."

"Difficulty adjusting in a group; unhappy, depressed, confused, withdrawn."

"Disruptive in class! screams loudly and often! very uncooperative, fighter, explosive, a bully."

"Frightened; bizarre behavior and unrelated, confused remarks; frequently not aware of others or what is going on around him. Lives in dream world at times. Thinking disorganized. No relationships with people."

"Anxious, distractible, hyperactive, very short attention span. Lives in imaginary world; does not learn."

"Chronically tense; overly sensitive; cries easily; jittery; nervous; too anxious to do school work."

These are examples of presenting symptoms to give an idea of the range. Many additional symptoms have, of course, been found, including fears and phobias, soiling and wetting, stealing and lying, and feelings of rejection and depression. They have come to us with a great deal of defiance of authority, hostility toward school, and teachers as well as toward the rest of the world, and with such an overwhelming lack of self-confidence - often hidden behind an air of bravado - they have felt utterly defeated in all of their relationships. They all have had in common, very poor school achievement, with three-quarters of them having made no academic progress whatsoever, and in the case of the youngest ones, no semblance of readiness for school. The remaining one-quarter have made only very slight progress. All have stood out as being different from the other children in the class, though almost all in the class have come from similar backgrounds and have suffered similar deprivations, both economically and culturally.

## Staffing

With this diversity of problems - educational, social and behavioral - it is apparent that a large staff, representing several disciplines, is necessary. There are four full time classroom teachers, and part-time music and art teachers; two and ½ psychiatric social workers; one clinical psychologist, one consulting psychiatrist, who also sees the children diagnostically; five counselors (their duties will be clarified later) and the necessary secretarial, domestic, maintenance, and bus driving staff. Neurological and pediatric consultations are available as needed with routine health examinations and innoculations provided through the public school health services. The supervisory and administrative staff of the residential treatment center at first functioned in these capacities for the

day program, and still do in part, but by this time some supervisory staff has been developed within the day program itself. The director of the Episcopal Center serves as director of the entire program, both residential and day.

## Program Structure

The children are picked up by bus at their homes. Breakfast, to eat or not as they choose, is available to all children when they arrive. We do not ask children if they have had breakfast, and most of the children are ready to eat. After breakfast, and a check by the nurse, half go to their classrooms, and the other half to various activities. After an hour, the groups change places. Those who were with a counselor go to their classrooms, and vice-versa. After a noon dinner they all have a play period, after which the morning procedure is repeated. The children leave at 3 o'clock, after having a snack of fruit juice and cookies. The above is a capsule description of the basic "bare bones" structure of a school day.

From our experience with disturbed, non-achieving children, we knew that they would need to be worked with in small groups for relatively short periods and in diversified activities. We also knew that these disadvantaged children in particular had a great deal to learn outside the classroom. We therefore, started out with a system whereby the children would be in the classroom half the time if they could tolerate this and with young men counselors or in other planned activities the other half.

With four full time teachers and thirty-five children each teacher is assigned eight or nine children, but has at the most four or five in her group at any one time. Sometimes she may be down to two children. The system is flexible; there are times when children can't be in the classroom at all, and others when they can't tolerate the entire period and have to be removed by a counselor. No matter how effective a grouping seems to be, it must incorporate flexibility to remain effective, since the children do not all change at the same rate or in the same

direction, and individual needs very from day to day, particularly when a child first comes.

## Teaching Program

These children have a history of nothing but failure as persons as well as students. To help them achieve some small success has to be the first task of the teachers. For it is not until a child has had some success that he can tolerate the challenges that may result in failure at times, but will help him grow. Every child is accepted as he is at that moment, in learning and in behavior. We are not concerned with what he should have been or could have been, but simply with what he is. So all teaching starts at a very simple level, to make some success possible, and very small victories loom very large indeed.

The teachers often find it necessary to devise their own subject matter as they try to capitalize on any interest or background knowledge displayed by the child. Interest in books is built up through actual experiences the child has. On the same table as the incubator where the children breathlessly watch baby chicks hatch, there are books open to scenes similar to the one they are watching. Interest in the books increases in spite of themselves. Whether growing plants from seeds, or finding interesting rocks, or feeding goldfish, or handling a turtle, or picking up pine cones, they have simply written books, or stories composed by the teachers, that tell them about the real live situation they're in. The books are simply there - not forced upon them - but they suddenly become alive and important-possibly even worth trying to learn to read! And for those who haven't reached the point where printed words - or even letters - have any recognizable form, or have not as yet developed an attention span that permits learning the basic elements of reading, pictures without words related to the experience the child is having and stories with puppets, give him an opportunity to express ideas, improve his speech and vocabulary, and begin to develop an interest in words. Since language skills are so vital in learning, we stress this kind of learning

from the very beginning, and the classrooms are filled with more "things" than books, and with a great many pictures and records with which a child can identify and that are conducive to story telling or listening. For listening is a wonderful learning experience, and a new one to most of our children. However, for some children listening comes about first through sounds and rhythms, so such techniques are used. There are great lacks in both visual and auditory discrimination, and the teachers devise many methods of working with these problems.

Some comments from teachers during the year are illuminating in regard to the development of "academic" work, and the preparatory work that must precede it. A few examples will suffice to give an idea of the functioning level academically. These comments are quoted from records:

> "He came to us with an attention span of about three seconds, barely able to say his name, unable to walk in the same direction as the class, or to recognize any form, though he was seven years old." After a great deal of play with blocks and puzzles and the "fun" kind of perceptual training, and after learning to listen and articulate, all happening in both the classroom and in activities, an interest in actual school work developed. But this took eight months!

Another seven year old, after six months, has as his greatest accomplishment "learning how to work quietly in a classroom, and to accept the teacher as an authority. There is no more wild, speedy destruction of everything around him. He has learned how it <u>feels</u> to sit quietly in a schoolroom - he is getting ready to learn."

A seven and a half year old, after a full school year, finished his first pre-primer and two work books, but "his greatest progress is in a tremendous growth in curiosity and talking ability."

During the years, the teachers have used many different types of teaching material and text books, searching for those most suitable for our children. Some emerge as being of more value than others, but what seems best for one group

or child is not always best for another. But many little things are important to all of th children, and help motivate them and capture their interest and attention. Even such things as the best use of bulletin boards become important! In every classroom the bulletin boards have exactly equal spaces marked off - one for each child - for display of his work. And his name must be there! The importance of something of his own and something with his name on it - really a space to call his own - cannot be over-emphasized - it is one of many small, but highly significant things that one can find in the classrooms. Words printed on many objects or to designate places in the classroom have been very helpful. Large posters with paper cut-outs to illustrate over, under, on top of, beneath, beside, near, far, up, down, etc., are devised by teachers to help the child with certain aspects of his language lacks. Most of the children are unfamiliar with adjectives and adverbs and connecting words, and need concrete illustrations in both pictures and movements. They need to touch, to feel and have spatial experiences for which they will later find words. Needless to say, this all also plays a part in their perceptual training. There is recognition in the class-room of the need for movement with our restless often hyperactive children. But learning can go on if the child is walking around, or stands instead of sits, or learns to count while hopping from one number to the next. But in the last analysis, it is the teachers' creativity and ingenuity, tolerance and patience, and above all the acceptance of every little boy as he is, that has provided the climate of the classroom that has made it possible for the children to begin to utilize all the aids to learning that have been provided for them.

## Activity Program

The children have a great deal to learn outside the classroom, and at some stages of their development this is the most important part of their learning. The activity program with the counselors has been most effective. This has been where the children have learned to live with one another, and accept discipline,

authority, and limitations. This is where many of the ways to build or destroy or evade relationships have been explored. The children have gained important satisfactions in athletics, games, handcrafts, etc., to help them develop good self-concepts and to further the establishment of meaningful relationships. Movies and short trips to many places of interest to the children have been incorporated into the program from time to time - some educational and some just for fun - to broaden the horizons for many of the children. The counselors, young college or graduate students, chosen for their ability to relate to and work with young children, become very important in the lives of the children. Some of the most successful "therapy" takes place on the playing field; a piggyback ride can do wonderful things for a little boy who has never had this experience. Spacious grounds to run on and trees to climb present him with a new world. To have a young man who plays with him, talks to him, and cares about him - who puts some structure, organization and discipline into his life - whom he can depend on to have the same rules tomorrow as he had yesterday - is a wonderful experience for many of our little boys. The counselors have been an indispensable part of the program and play a most important role in the lives of children who often have never known a father.

Music and art have also played a vital role. The children have learned to sing in groups, enjoying it and finding it easier to memorize songs than more prosaic material. They get great pleasure from both listening and performing. Painting and drawing has also been very important, and the walls have been filled with their colorful productions during the year. The painting is at a very immature level, but gives them great satisfaction, and that is what is important. No creative piece of work can be anything but right and good.

Learning to use and enjoy a library is another needed activity. The library is set up exactly as a public library is, and is very well equipped, with books for every interest and reading level. The children make good use of it. They learn something about the responsibility as well as the pleasure of borrowing books. Our hope is that many of our children will leave with an interest in

using their school and neighborhood libraries.

Workshop is a wonderful experience, not only for developing skills but for giving the children tremendous satisfaction. Children who can attend to classroom work for only very brief or even fleeting periods might work diligently at sanding in order to put a beautiful, smooth finish on a little bench or bookrack. A boy will work like a beaver to build a jewelry box for his mother, or a tool box for his father. He's learning patience and perseverance, and he's learning something about arithmetic as he learns to measure, and about listening to directions and following them if his creations are going to turn out right, He has to learn something about self-control if he's to be able to stay in a workshop full of tools that could become weapons, and while he's building with wood he's also building his ego, and having great fun in the process.

## Special Activities

The clinical psychologist plays a very significant role with the children, in a variety of psychological evaluations and educational assessments of specific abilities and disabilities. This is, of course, helpful in the classroom and even on the playground. Psycho-therapy is another important part of the program for many children. Some need such treatment and can profit from it as soon as they come. Others may not be able to profit from treatment until they have been with us for several months. Still others may get all they need from the therapeutic milieu.

## Parent Involvement

With a strong conviction that it is difficult to be of lasting help to seriously disturbed children without also working with their parents, we have tried to involve all parents in a casework process. The social workers at first met with resistance or out-right hostility from some families, but this has not persisted very long in most instances. There are variations in the degree of cooperation or of understanding why they need to be involved, but gradually many

of our families (or, more usually, mothers) have been able to begin to think in terms of parent-child relationships, their own impact on the child, and ways of improving the atmosphere in the home. Many problems between the parents come to light, and problems of the other children and many of the needs of the family are brought out. Here the social workers are able to help them find the proper agencies to help them. But we do not take over parental responsibility. We offer help and encouragement, and if necessary take them by the hand, but we do not do for them the things we feel they could and should do for themselves. Many times it would be far easier for the social workers to "take over". But this would not be of lasting help, and would not further the relationship between the child and his family.

The social workers have seen many changes in the parents, and the following quotations give some interesting glimpses into the process:

"There has been increased awareness and increased interest in the child's problems."

"Some parents are beginning to recognize the relationship of parts of the child's behavior to parts of their own behavior."

"Some parents are becoming more aware of their own rights as well as responsibilities as parents, and more fundamentally, as people."

"More parents are becoming aware of community programs and services which they can use to meet their own needs."

"A greater number of parents are really involving themselves in a relationship with the social worker."

This kind of relationship - a constructive rather than a dependent one - evolves gradually, and not every parent is able to benefit. Some may never be able to do so, but many are responding.

## How It All Fits Together

A disadvantaged child comes into the world with a ready-made environmental handicap waiting for him. He gets wrapped up in it immediately, as though in swaddling clothes, and this is where he stays for far too long a time. He enters into an existence of deprivation, both economically and culturally, with the bleak and barren way of living that comes with utter poverty. One has to wonder if the world doesn't seem like a long, dark and empty tunnel, with no light at the end. Discouragement and despair are the lot of his parents--for them life seems to be a struggle for survival. Somehow these children grow, and finally the time comes when they are ready for school--ready in terms of age, but often far from ready in any other way. Some children have the strength to survive better than others, and they manage to make some kind of adjustment. Some fall by the wayside, unable to cope with the demands and expectations of any society except that of the block in which they live. These are the children who fill up the emptiness inside of themselves with bravado, violence, and anger--or sometimes with a life of fantasy. These are the children who become emotionally disturbed adding another handicap to those they had when they came into the world.

To cope with any one of these handicaps is a difficult problem, but to cope with all of them and give a child a new start in life requires a whole new concept of teaching, with teaching very broadly defined. We have worked with a team approach, with the team consisting of educator, psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, counselor and parent, in order to provide a total therapeutic milieu. Our hope is that the child will be able to make both a school and social adjustment that will make it possible for him to eventually find his place in the sun. Every child should have that right--perhaps we should have an eleventh commandment, "Thou shalt find thy place in the sun."

The impact of the child's handicaps on his learning and on his behavior are all too vivid. Consider his immediate environment, where more often than not he has been a part of the struggle for survival. Such struggles are neither

gentle nor forbearing, nor conducive to loving one's neighbor. He has lived in chaos and disorganization, and one cannot fail to believe that at least some of this becomes internalized. He has found himself wanting, in every way and on every count, and his self-concept gets lower and lower. Often there is no father in the home, and his mother has so many troubles of her own she may have little to give a child hungry for some response.

With all these problems, how can he learn in school? How can he fit into a group? How can he find order out of chaos? How can he make sense out of symbols, this child who hasn't been read to, who hasn't had crayons and paper to scribble on? How can he follow directions, having never learned to listen? How can he feel any motivation to learn, this child who has no thought of anything good in the future? Is there a future? His parents would say, "No". How can he learn to generalize and abstract--so vital in acquiring new learning--this child who has no past to build on and no future to think about? It struck us forcibly one day when we suddenly realized that we had never heard a little boy talk about what he wanted to be when he grew up! We coined a name for our boys--the "now" children--with no yesterdays worth remembering, and no tomorrows to look forward to with joy. For there has been little joy--actually, very little fun--in their lives, and again, every child should have that right. Perhaps a twelfth commandment is in order--"Thou shalt have fun."

So we have many people, and their work must be coordinated, to deal with all these interwoven parts of a child's life. The social worker must bring to the staff her knowledge of what is going on at home so the teachers, the counselors and the therapists can better understand the variables in a child's behavior, and deal with them.

The behavior of the child in school often reflects some problem going on at home, and in the continued contact we have with parents, we quickly learn what has happened. During the year there have been many days when some children suddenly regress, or seem unusually unstable, or are extremely anxious or violent.

We try to find out what is happening, so we can help the child with his reaction, and, if possible, help alleviate the situation bringing on the acute behavior. The social workers are the vital link there, between the school and the home. The families we are working with are faced with so many emergencies, so many breakdowns, actually, and with so many really desperate circumstances, that such a relationship between the school and the home becomes extraordinarily important in the life of the child.

The counselors and teachers must work together and many times activities can be correlated with lesson plans--and each enhances the other. The psychologists' and psychiatrists' findings are vital in the classroom and in one classroom the psychologist and teacher together are having group meetings with the children --reality therapy. And so it goes--with all staff members and the parents contributing to the total picture. Sometimes this kind of team work isn't easy, particularly since it means that at any given time, any one aspect of the child's functioning may be the most important one. For example, there may well be a period when what a child is doing out on the field or in the workshop is contributing much more to his development than the classroom is. This may well be reversed at another time. There would be other periods of time when therapy might be the important thing in his life, or when what is going on at home might be of the greatest significance. What this all suggests is that there is no room for staff rivalries; there is no room for prima donnas; there must be mutual respect; there must, in fact, be team work of the highest order.

No matter what else is going on, however, there are some things that can never be left out of the picture. These are such intangibles as a free and accepting atmosphere, but one with limits and boundaries; warmth and compassion, without superficial sentimentality; affection bestowed and received; trust won and retained; and a feeling of safety and protection as the children reach out to explore new worlds; and last, but far from least, having fun.

We are often asked--does it all do any good? In fact, does it all pay off? The answer is a very firm Yes. We do not expect every child to make the kind of progress we would like to see, but all make progress, and most make good progress. Of most importance is what happens after they leave. Do they retain their gains? Are they able to maintain themselves successfully in school? Are they learning? Are things better at home? To get the answers we are doing follow-up studies on all children, and we now have two and three year follow-ups. We have lost some children who have moved away, but out of 30 follow-ups with the schools, we have 19 getting along well; 5 who are doing "fairly well", but could be better; 2 who fluctuate--at times they do well and at other times have some problems; and 4 who are not getting along as well as they should but have retained some of their gains. It is of interest and importance that those who are not doing well come from families where we had little if any impact.

## Conclusion

A way of working with severely disadvantaged and disturbed children has been presented. The years to come will tell the story of its lasting effects, but it looks promising. At least many children have been given a chance and are making a new start in life, with new, good self-concepts and warm feelings toward others. There are no thermometers to measure the warmth of human relationships, but we see it and we feel it, all around us.

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